

TOWN MEETING COORDINATING COMMITTEE

Fiscal Year 2005

The Committee's Antecedents. This first report of the Coordinating Committee takes into consideration the continuity of Town Meeting's efforts that brought the Committee into being. Much of what has engaged and guided this committee in fiscal year 2005 is owing to the grounds prepared for it in fiscal year 2004. In offering what will be an accessible account of the Committee's origins, we also note for acknowledgment the names of the people who were involved in those beginnings.

The Town Meeting Coordinating Committee was established by warrant Article 3 at the Special Town Meeting of October 27, 2003. Historically, it is Amherst Town Meeting's first elected committee. The proposal to create a committee of Town Meeting members elected by Town Meeting members was one of several recommendations made by the Town Meeting Improvements Committee and accepted at that meeting.

The Town Meeting Improvements Committee was itself established by the earlier Annual Town Meeting of 2003. A warrant article submitted by Town Meeting member Alan Root petitioned for the creation of an ad hoc committee with that name to "recommend to the Fall 2003 Town Meeting such additions and/or changes in bylaws and other governing acts, rules and regulations so as to improve Town Meeting."

The article specified that the committee was to consist of nine members to be appointed by the Town Moderator, at least five of whom were required to be Town Meeting members. Accordingly, Town Moderator Harrison L. Gregg appointed Frank Gatti, Lyle McGeoch, Kenneth Mosakowski (TM), Jeanne Potash, Christopher Riddle (TM), Alan Root (TM), Irving Rothberg (TM), Jana Sorge (TM), David Yaukey (TM). At its organizing session, McGeoch, Rothberg and Root were designated as the committee's Chair, Vice-Chair and Secretary, respectively.

The TMIC averaged weekly sessions from its inception through to the convening of the 2003 Fall Town Meeting. The Committee based much of its discussions on the concerns Amherst citizens voiced about Town Meeting at a public hearing as well as on the ideas they offered toward its improvement. In addition, the Committee conducted interviews with members of the community especially known for their knowledge and experience of Town governmental affairs. The creation of an elected Town Meeting committee was a recurrent theme in the pool of ideas from which the TMIC drew, including those generated within the Committee itself.

The charge of the seven-member committee the TMIC recommended to Town Meeting was to

provide continuing leadership and organization to Town Meeting and to extend outreach to the community on behalf of Town Meeting. The issues the Committee shall address in its first year shall include, but not be limited to the following: (1) organizing warrant forums prior to Town Meeting open to the public, (2) communicating to the public about Town Meeting through various means, (3) improving the education and orientation system for new Members, and (4) researching ways for recording individual votes at Town Meeting. The Committee shall perform such other duties as Town Meeting shall determine from time to time.

The enabling article stipulated that “The initial Committee members shall be elected at the Annual Town Meeting of 2004.” Once in place, the Committee was required “in its first year, to propose a procedure for electing subsequent Committee members.”

Committee Status. The first election of the Town Meeting Coordinating Committee was held on May 10, 2004. A full term on the Committee was defined as two years. Elected for the terms indicated were Paul Bobrowski (2 years), Zachary J. Bouricius (2 years), Harry Oldham Brooks (1 year), Nancy M. Gordon (1 year), Irving P. Rothberg (2 years), Marcie Abramson Sclove (1 year), and Otto L. Stein (2 years). Rothberg, Sclove and Gordon were designated as Chair, Vice-Chair and Secretary, respectively. Over the course of the Committee's first year, Margaret R. Roberts and Hilda B. Greenbaum were appointed by the Town Moderator to complete the year remaining on the terms of Bobrowski and Bouricius, who had resigned.

As required, the Committee in its initial year established a procedure for electing its members. This, among other stipulations, was incorporated in Article 2, “Town Meeting Coordinating Committee: Rules and Regulations,” accepted by the Special Town Meeting of November 8, 2004. Basically, three Committee members must be elected in odd-numbered years, four in even ones. Correspondingly, three seats were filled at the election of May 4, 2005. The three newly elected members are so designated in this list of current Committee members: Harry Oldham Brooks (*elected*), Hilda B. Greenbaum, Irving P. Rothberg, Margaret R. Roberts, Marcie Abramson Sclove (*elected*), Otto L. Stein, and Merrylees “Molly” Turner (*elected*). Rothberg, Sclove, and Brooks were elected Chair, Vice-Chair and Stacker, respectively.

As part of the election process, the Committee, in cooperation with the Town Clerk, collected and distributed the statements of the Town Meeting members seeking seats on the Committee.

Committee Activity. The previously mentioned “Rules and Regulations” was the first warrant article the Coordinating Committee submitted to Town Meeting. Its import was to further define the Committee as an integral element of Town Meeting. Drafted by Committee member Paul Bobrowski, it sets out in full the procedures for Committee elections, the terms of membership succession and the method for filling vacancies. With respect to the Committee's internal organization, the article specifies the Committee's offices, and anticipates its role as an entity of Town Meeting by allowing for the creation of subcommittees, to which Town Meeting members who are not on the Coordinating Committee may be appointed. The Committee is currently considering an article that would incorporate the Committee and its governing rules into the Town's bylaws.

The Committee has in fact designated a number of subcommittees that are working on various matters such as accountable voting, the Committee's finances, improvements in Town Meeting, contact with committees and personnel involved in Town government, a program in the Amherst schools to make students familiar with Town government, and, to the extent possible, improvements in the Middle School's auditorium arrangements for Town Meeting.

Since the Committee was created unfunded, we presented at the Finance Committee's meeting of February 10, 2005 a request for a budget of \$800 that was based on the estimate of operating expenses members of the Committee had borne to date. It is not clear at this writing how the request will be addressed.

From the beginning, the Committee has made a major effort to devise ways to improve communication within Town Meeting, and beyond with the Amherst public. What was started in the fall of 2004 as a voluntary and experimental e-mail information service for Town Meeting members may now be regarded as a proven function that is expected of the Committee. The number of subscribers has approximately doubled from the 45 registered at the time of the Special Town Meeting of November 2004. In terms of the wider public, the Committee continues its companion e-mail program for Amherst citizens wishing to provide Town Meeting members with advance copies of the documents placed on the back table of the Middle School auditorium. Thanks to the help of the Town's Department of Information Technology, the Committee has been able to post appropriate information on Amherst's website. In fact, none of the electronic services that the Committee has been able to offer would have been possible without the unstinting cooperation of that department.

The Committee has kept the Amherst public in mind in other, more direct ways. On March 8, 2005, the Committee sponsored and personally funded a public lecture by Professor Frank Bryan of the University of Vermont. Bryan, an authority on Vermont's town meetings, spoke on the topic "Modernism and Town Meeting: Problems and Prospects." As a Town Meeting-related event, the lecture was possibly unprecedented; the blizzard that took place the evening of the lecture was not. The lecture was taped and cablecast by ACTV several times.

In the interest of promoting public understanding as well as encouraging informed debate in Town Meeting, the Committee, in advance of the Fall 2004 and Spring 2005 meetings, organized two warrant information events, each with different formats and scope but both serving the identical purpose of elucidating the content of warrant articles. Co-sponsored with the League of Women Voters, the first type was a Town-wide occasion held at the Middle School. An orientation for new Town Meeting members was included in the spring meeting. The second consisted of a series of precinct forums conducted in neighborhood venues by trained facilitators. Encouraged by the public response, the Committee will continue to organize both types of review.

A survey the Committee conducted during the Annual Town Meeting of 2005 showed that members still favor the idea of electronic, accountable voting but are at the same time hesitant about the possible expense in this era of budget shortages. The Committee will continue to look for outside funding toward the purchase of an optimal system.

Irving Rothberg, Chair